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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Malaysians' perceptions of individuality in their children and on general characteristics of Malaysian child training practices. Research was carried out in three adjoining villages where well over half of the income of residents is derived from wage and salaried employment in industrial towns. The study consisted of interviews with over 30 mothers (or other caretakers) of more than 40 children, half of whom were under the age of two and the other half spread across the preschool years. Subjects were selected by going from house to house and enquiring about families with young children. The final interview schedule concerned six areas of behavior: feeding, sleep, bathing and dressing, strangers, sensitivity and illness, plus a general summary category called personality. All interview sessions were taped. Informants stated that children were similar with respect to cleanliness, playing with others, and sleeping with parents, but that individuality among children was evident in their eating patterns, shyness or friendliness toward strangers, patterns of illness and speed of recovery, activity level and motor skills, and mood. Generally, Malaysian parents expect and encourage individual differences in children. They use language to control their children's behavior and provide easily understood reasons for warnings and restrictions. (Author/RH)

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# Child Rearing and Individuality among Suburban Malays

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The purposes of this research, carried out in a distant suburb of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, were twofold: first, we sought to study Malay perceptions of individuality in children and second, to study the general characteristics of Malay child training practices.

Background: The study was carried out while one of the researchers (David) was lecturing at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. We performed the data gathering during the six month period from August through December, 1968, during the afternoons after lectures and other duties were concluded or not scheduled. This usually meant visiting the fieldwork area three or four afternoons a week by car. The research site, near the town of Sungai Buluh, is located about 16 miles from downtown Kuala Lumpur, and 20 miles from our apartment in Petaling Jaya.

The Site: The research was carried out in three adjoining villages on the road to the old, former rail link town of Kuang, 4 miles north of the east-west road to the coast of Selangor. This is not a peasant area. Although there are rubber smallholdings and estates all around, well over half of the income of residents is derived from wage and salaried employments in Kuala Lumpur and surrounding industrial towns. There is some paddy farming but the low yields of the fields due to the poor soils have made nonagricultural employments much more attractive.

The same may be said of the rubber smallholdings that account for over twice the acreage devoted to paddy. The low price of rubber makes rubber light work for the old, who can be content to earn one half what a young, able bodied male would make in a factory and a still smaller percentage of what a salaried civil servant would earn. Men and women commute to work here. Women often take time off from working for maternity leave. Some are housewives.

Ethnic Composition of the Village: The State of Selangor, surrounding the capital district of Kuala Lumpur is one of great ethnic diversity within the Malay community. The growth of Kuala Lumpur as a colonial capital in the 20th century attracted Indonesian laborers from a variety of Sumatran and Javanese ethnicities to work as agricultural land. Today the areas around Sungai Buloh consist of approximately one half villagers who trace descent to peoples of Indonesia and one half that claim Malayan ancestry. This is only a rough estimate that does not take account of the many marriages of Indonesians with native Malays in the present and past generations. Villagers claim that they are all Malays and only the older people speak the Indonesian languages in their homes while their children do not understand them and speak Bahasa Malaysia, which they learn in school and speak everywhere. We do not question that there has been a trend toward linguistic and ethnic homogenization, but we did note several children in their teens and older young adults who spoke Minangkabau and Javanese with older people. This leads to questions

about the validity of calling research in this area Malay research. We suggest that these informants reflect local attitudes and ideas and are no more ethnically diverse than Americans in Eastern cities. They are all exposed to common socializing institutions: schools, radio and television, magazines and adult education classes. We should think of cultures as internally diverse and broadening and that informants represent part of the diversity to us. There are many points of common orientation and we judge that these far outnumber the ethnic byways.

The Study: Our study consisted of interviews with over 30 mothers (or other caretakers) about over 40 children, half of which were under the age of two and the other half spread across the pre-school years. The interviews lasted from somewhat over one half hour to well over an hour. Most of the interviews were with mothers, but when the child's caretaker was a grandparent, we interviewed the grandparent. We selected our subjects by going from house to house enquiring about families with young children. The interviews cover well over half of the households with children but a much lower percentage of children.

Our questionnaire attempted to discover which areas of early childhood experience are thought to reveal a child's individual personality, and which aspects are thought to be the same for all children. The interviews were conducted with a schedule that collected basic data about the households visited, their incomes and composition, and we collected data concerning parental observations of their children. We got the original schedule from Thomas and Chess (1963), but we modified

it considerably in the field. Our final schedule concerned six areas of behavior: feeding, sleep, bathing and dressing, strangers, sensitivity and illness and a general summary category that we called personality, for other matters not covered in the interview. We taped all sessions.

Findings: Children were said to be similar to one another with respect to cleanliness. All children enjoy bathing and are bathed several times a day for relief from heat as well as for cleanliness. Children of all ages dislike wet or soiled clothing and infants expect to have their clothes changed immediately when wet, while children old enough to play outdoors are said to come in and ask for a change if their clothes become dirty. Parents said that they comply with these requests as quickly as possible, and that delays would make the child justifiably angry. Children are also said to be distressed by uncomfortable clothing and to be sensitive to heat, cold, strong odors and other kinds of unpleasant stimulation.

All children are said to enjoy playing with other children and to have friends from one year of age or earlier. While some are initially shy with new children, this is thought to be overcome quickly. Parents encourage children to have friends, and they say children should learn to get along with other people so they will be cooperative members of the community when older.

Concerning playthings, most children past early infancy have some toys, and most parents said their children preferred new things to old;

few were said to have a special toy or object that they carried or played with continually. Another area of similarity of reports is in sleeping. All very young children sleep with their parents, and older children sleep with parents or siblings. Infants have daytime naps in a cloth or rattan swing near where their mothers are doing housework. Mothers say that no child would want to sleep alone, and children usually stay up at night until their parents retire.

Informants recognize individuality in eating patterns. Infants are said to vary in the strength of appetite. About half of the infants were breast fed and half bottle fed. Among the reasons for bottle feeding was that an infant did not want to breast feed. Feeding schedules for infants vary according to demand. Solid foods are introduced at different ages and many parents said that the child did not like cereal when he or she first tried it, so the parent waited for several weeks or longer before offering it again. As children grow older they are expected to have individual preferences for foods and they are not required to eat foods they dislike. For example, children vary in the age when they like and tolerate peppery foods. Surprisingly, several mothers said their children did not like rice, the Malay dietary staple. This is seen as a problem that the child will eventually outgrow.

While sociability outside the home is expected of all children, parents note variations in shyness or friendliness toward strangers, particularly adults, and they tend to remember in detail each of their

children's reactions at different ages, for example, one child cried when she saw strangers, another if a stranger tried to pick him up, one not at all.

Parents see great variation in patterns of illness: some children get many colds and fevers while others are rarely or never sick. Most children are said to eat poorly, sleep less, play less and cry when sick, but others are said to behave in their usual ways when sick. Individual differences are also described in their speed of recovery from illnesses. Parents made many comments about individual variations in activity level: some children are noisy and active while others are relatively quiet. They remember differences among their children in age of acquiring motor skills such as walking, and there is a belief that children that walk early talk late and the reverse. Differences in mood are often mentioned, in particular, some children are said to become angry more readily than others and to be placated more or less quickly when angry. They are often compared to one or the other parent in this regard, and it is often commented that a child who physically resembles the parent of the opposite sex will be cool-tempered while a boy who looks like his father or a girl who looks like her mother will be hot-tempered. Aside from resemblances, parents often say that a child prefers one parent to the other although they do not think that a child would prefer one of his or her siblings to the others. They are said to love all of their siblings equally.

Some General Observations: Malay parents expect and encourage individual differences in children. Mothers often explain a change in feeding or other routines by saying "He didn't want it." Giving medicine is seen as stressful because this is one area where a child's opinion must be overruled. Mothers of infants watch for signals of sleepiness and the desire for elimination, and adjust their behavior to the child's.

The parents we interviewed emphasized the use of language to control behavior, and this was evident from our observations as well. Warnings and restrictions on the child's behavior are nearly always accompanied by a reason, usually a one-word reason such as: Hot! Hurts! Dirty! Parents say that giving reasons helps children to understand things and eventually to develop self-control. University students commented, in early reports of our findings, that the American way of saying "stop that!" to children (which they had observed) seemed cruel because the child would not understand what is required and why. In describing children's early language, mothers mention the child's attempt to control the environment: they say the child will want to ask for food and drink. Toilet training is also described as a verbal process: the child learns to say when he has to eliminate, then the parent takes him or her to the latrine.

Following from both the awareness of individuality and the importance of language as a means of control, Malay children seem to be acutely aware of their feelings and changes in their state of being and are easily upset when they cannot explain a situation of

unease. When a fearful situation cannot be explained, such as fear of the dark, parents say that the child is afraid of an evil spirit. Children manifest fear of the things they are told should inspire fear, such as dirt, sickness and pain. They are being given adult tools to deal with the situations of discomfort that arise in childhood. This may account for the ease and sophistication of Malay children in a wide range of social situations.